

SCOPUS

THE FIELD SEPARATION OF COMMON, ETHIOPIAN AND GREAT SNIPE

(*GALLINAGO GALLINAGO*, *NIGRIPENNIS* AND *MEDIA*)

P. B. Taylor

Three species of snipe are likely to be encountered in eastern and south central Africa. These are the visiting Palaearctic Great Snipe *Gallinago media* and Common Snipe *G. gallinago*, and the local Ethiopian Snipe *G. nigripennis*. The separation of these three in the field is beset with problems as they are similar in plumage and size. Moreover, they are difficult to see on the ground, and can usually only be observed for brief periods in flight. In East Africa, the main problem is the separation of Ethiopian and Common Snipe. The latter winters commonly in Kenya, Uganda and northernmost Tanzania. However, it reaches Zambia only in small numbers, although possibly regularly (Button 1973, and personal observations in Ndola), and has been collected only once in Malawi (Benson & Benson 1977). By contrast, the Great Snipe has been recorded surprisingly infrequently in Kenya and Uganda in recent years, but is a regular and reasonably common visitor to Zambia and Malawi. Although they are not dealt with further here, it should be pointed out that two other species of Palaearctic snipe have reached East Africa. The Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* has occurred several times in Kenya and Uganda and also three times in Zambia (Benson, Brooke, Dowsett & Irwin 1971, and two personal sightings at Ndola), and a single Pin-tailed Snipe *G. stenura* has been netted at Naivasha in Kenya (Backhurst 1969). The Jack Snipe is relatively easy to distinguish by its small size, short bill and flight habits (see, for example Peterson, Mountfort & Hollom 1954), but the Pin-tailed Snipe is extremely similar to the Common Snipe in the field, and is probably overlooked in East Africa.

Identification of the Great Snipe is relatively easy given good views, and detailed comparisons between Great and Common Snipe have been given by Wallace (1976) with further notes and corrections by the same author later (Wallace 1977). Great and Ethiopian Snipe may similarly be separated fairly easily but it is much more difficult to distinguish between Common and Ethiopian Snipe and some authors have suggested that this is not possible in the field (Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1970, Benson & Benson 1977). I have been able to observe all three species together at Itawa swamps, Ndola, Zambia, and my observations from this locality, together with my experience of the Common Snipe in Europe and of the other two species elsewhere in Africa, form the basis of the following notes. I have also examined specimens of all three species at the National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi and have handled a large number of Great Snipe at Ndola. In my opinion it is possible to separate Common and Ethiopian Snipe in the field, especially when the two are seen together. The following notes concentrate on characters which may be observed in flight, but details of the habitats favoured by each species at Ndola are also given.

FIELD CHARACTERS

These may be conveniently separated into plumage characters, size and shape characters, and mode of flight and call. A snipe does not usually rise until one is close to it and it is then often a few seconds before binoculars can be focussed on it. During these initial few seconds important features to note are the call, which is usually given on rising, the colour of the underside, and the flight action. The upperwing and back patterns, the length of the bill and its angle of carriage may then be observed through binoculars. It is important to watch the bird as it comes down, because it is at this moment that the tail pattern is best seen.

Upperwing Pattern

The Great Snipe is easily identified on this character. It has pale tips to all upperwing coverts, these tips forming a rather spotted area on the forewing, bordered at the rear by a more distinct white line (the tips of the median coverts). The uniformly dark greater and primary coverts form a dark central wing panel which has a distinct white rear border (formed by the tips of these coverts). The flight feathers are rather less dark than the greater coverts and there is a narrow pale trailing edge formed by the whitish tips to the secondaries. The dark central wing panel with its white anterior and posterior borders is usually very obvious in the field and is well shown in photographs in Wallace (1977). The upperwings of Common and Ethiopian Snipe are much more uniformly coloured than that of the Great Snipe, and the only real pattern is the whitish trailing edge to the secondaries, which is usually broader and more prominent than in the Great Snipe. Common and Ethiopian Snipe upperwings are noticeably darker than the upperside of the body in flight.

Back Pattern

The Great Snipe is intricately patterned with buff and pale brown and, although it has longitudinal pale lines on the back, these are much less clearly-marked than in the other species, and often appear broken. Common and Ethiopian Snipe lack the intricate back pattern of the Great Snipe but have very distinct pale lines along the back. In skins these lines were found to be paler and more distinct in the Common Snipe, but I have not noted this as a good field character. The back of the Common Snipe is a somewhat paler brown than that of the Ethiopian Snipe, a feature which is mentioned by Snow (1978) and by Prater, Marchant & Vuorinen (1977) and which was apparent in museum skins. This character is noticeable in the field but is only really useful when a direct comparison can be made between the two species. I have found that the back of the Common Snipe appears more uniform in ground colour than that of the Ethiopian Snipe, the latter having darker markings and also some quite rufous markings in many individuals. The darker back of the Ethiopian Snipe contrasts more strongly with the white belly than does that of the Common Snipe.

Head Pattern

All three species have a pale central crown stripe and stripes on the face. The head and neck of the Great Snipe is, however, more spotted and the stripes less distinct than in the other species, giving a more 'mealy' appearance (Wallace 1976, 1977). These characters are best seen in birds on the ground.

Tail Pattern

This is a very important field character. The Common Snipe has much less white in the outer tail than the other two species, and in direct flight no white may be visible. However, when a snipe's tail is not spread the full extent of the white is difficult to judge, and the tails of Great and Ethiopian Snipe may at times also show little white in flight. The tail pattern may best be seen when the bird spreads its tail on coming in to land and sometimes also

on take-off. Both Great and Ethiopian Snipe have broad white outer tails and the Great Snipe often keeps its tail partly spread in flight, thus making the white very noticeable. In contrast, the Ethiopian Snipe, though usually showing some white in flight, may occasionally show no more than the Common Snipe; only when the bird lands is the extent of the white fully (and often startlingly) visible. First-year Great Snipe may have much less white in the tail than adults, but have usually moulted the tail feathers by mid-winter, when they then appear similar to adults (Prater et al. 1977).

Underside

All three species have barred flanks but in the Great Snipe the barring extends to the underwing coverts and axillaries and also to the lower flanks, the belly (which is not usually barred in the centre) and the tibiae. The ground colour of the underside of the Great Snipe is off-white or buff, darker in immatures than in adults. Common and Ethiopian Snipe have pure white bellies and tibiae and the barring does not extend as far down the flanks as in the Great Snipe. In flight, therefore, although an adult Great Snipe which is less heavily barred than usual may appear quite pale on the belly, it is never as strikingly white in this region as even the most heavily marked individuals of the other species.

Bill

The bill of the Ethiopian Snipe is longer than that of the Common Snipe (Snow 1978), and when the two species are seen together that of the Ethiopian Snipe appears markedly longer and more unwieldy. The usefulness of this character in the field is limited, and estimates of bill-length in isolated birds are probably not reliable unless the observer is very familiar with both species. In flight, the bills of both species are held pointing downwards. The bill of the Great Snipe is noticeably shorter and in flight is carried nearer to the horizontal, often at only 10-15° below the horizontal.

Structure and Silhouette

The Great Snipe is a bulkier bird than the other two species, and has broader wings. These features, coupled with its slow and more direct flight, give it a much heavier appearance in the field. The slimmer Common and Ethiopian Snipe are less easy to separate on general shape, but the wing of the Ethiopian Snipe is broader and more rounded than that of the Common Snipe. This is mentioned by Prater et al. (1977) and D.J. Pearson (*in litt.*) points out that in the field this feature is especially noticeable when a side view of the bird is obtained.

Flight Action and Behaviour

It is sometimes possible to identify the Great Snipe on flight action alone, as it rises at a much shallower angle than the other two species, flies slowly and directly, usually for only a short distance, and drops sharply into cover. Long flights (that is, over about 30m) are not usual in Great Snipe, but Wallace (1977) comments that long flights may be made when the birds are flushed from habitat edges. The flight action shows none of the typical dash and zigzagging of the Common Snipe and indeed, a Great Snipe in flight is often more reminiscent of such waders as sandpipers and plovers than of a 'typical' snipe. This feature is mentioned by Wallace (1977). Great Snipe may occasionally waver slightly in flight but this is not a well-marked action and is made more slowly than the zigzags of the other species. The Common Snipe rises steeply and flies in a typically fast zigzagging manner, often for a long distance, before coming down less sharply than a Great Snipe. The Ethiopian Snipe also rises steeply and flies faster than the Great Snipe, but differs from the Common Snipe in that it usually flies less rapidly and zigzags much less markedly, sometimes hardly at all. D.J. Pearson (*in litt.*) has

also noticed that the flight of the Ethiopian Snipe is more fluttery than that of the Common Snipe. Any snipe with a very fast, strongly zigzagging flight is therefore almost certainly a Common Snipe, and at Itawa this species usually flew a much greater distance when flushed than did Ethiopian Snipe, although this was not a constant characteristic.

It should be borne in mind that tired, newly-arrived snipe may fly more slowly than normal and that any snipe on occasion may make very short flights.

I have often found that Great Snipe, after flying away from the observer when flushed, will turn and fly across his line of vision, providing a good view of the underside pattern and the bill. The other species usually continue in a more or less direct line, at least until they are a considerable distance away.

Call

I have found the call of the Common Snipe to be louder and more rasping than that of the Ethiopian Snipe, although similar in form. Common Snipe at Itawa tend to call more frequently than Ethiopian, the calls being given in rapid succession. The usual call of the Great Snipe is a feeble croak, easily separable from the notes of the other species, and I have found that this call may be frequently uttered both on rising and in flight. At Itawa it is exceptional for a Great Snipe not to call when flushed. Wallace (1976) considers that Great Snipe call infrequently in winter, but this is certainly not true of birds in Zambia. It is possible that the wing noise made as the bird rises may mask the feeble call, and observers at Itawa who are not familiar with the call often do not hear it unless it is pointed out to them.

HABITAT PREFERENCES

In Zambia, Great Snipe may occur in a wide variety of grassy habitats, but are most often found in short grass, usually wet but sometimes dry. They may occur in short dry grass on football pitches, golf courses and the banks of sewage settling ponds, especially on passage. At such times they are often easy to see, allowing close approach, and are presumably tired and reluctant to fly. Wintering birds at Itawa usually occur in short wet grass but are sometimes found in shallowly-inundated or muddy long-grassed areas alongside the other species of snipe, and also in wet or muddy open areas with sparse tussocks of short grass, plough furrows etc. They often favour cattle-trampled grass even if no mud is present, and at Itawa occur in groups of up to 15 in small areas of trampled wet grass (often under acacias where cattle have rested in the shade) - at such times there are often few to be found elsewhere in the area. They fly to feed at muddy tracks and puddle margins at dusk.

Ethiopian Snipe at Itawa are usually found in wet areas, often completely flooded, with tussocks or grass varying in height from a few centimetres to (more commonly) up to half a metre. They are also seen on muddy paths, plough furrows and ditches in grassland. They generally favour taller, denser cover than does Great Snipe.

Common Snipe at Itawa occur in similar habitat to Ethiopian but seem to avoid the tallest grass and the most deeply-flooded areas, being most frequently flushed from areas where mud is present and grass is tussocky.

SUMMARY

The Great Snipe is relatively easy to identify in the field on its wing and back pattern, extensively barred underside, short bill, bulky outline, slow level flight and feeble call. Common and Ethiopian Snipe are more difficult to separate but may be identified by the colour of the back, the tail pattern, bill length, flight action and call. The Great Snipe is found in a wider variety of habitats than the other species.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to G.R. Cunningham-van Someren for allowing me to examine skins at the National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi and for his comments on field identification, and to D.J. Pearson and D.A. Turner for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

REFERENCES

- BACKHURST, G.C. 1969. A record of *Gallinago stenura* from Kenya. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 89: 95-96.
- BENSON, C.W. & BENSON, F.M. 1977. *The birds of Malaŵi*. Limbe: Montfort Press.
- _____, BROOKE, R.K., DOWSETT, R.J. & IRWIN, M.P.S. 1971. *The birds of Zambia*. London: Collins.
- BUTTON, E.L. 1973. Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) in Copperbelt Province: a species new to Zambia. *Bulletin of the Zambian Ornithological Society* 5: 72.
- MACKWORTH-PRAED, C.W. & GRANT, C.H.B. 1970. *African handbook of birds*. Series 3, vol. 1. *Birds of west central and western Africa*. London: Longmans Green.
- PETERSON, R., MOUNTFORT, G. & HOLLUM, P.A.D. 1954. *A field guide to the birds of Britain and Europe*. London: Collins.
- PRATER, A.J., MARCHANT, J.H. & VUORINEN, J. 1977. *Guide to the identification and ageing of Holarctic waders*. Tring: British Trust for Ornithology.
- SNOW, D.W. (Ed.) 1978. *An atlas of speciation in African non-passerine birds*. London: British Museum (Nat. Hist.).
- WALLACE, D.I.M. 1976. Distinguishing Great Snipe from Snipe. *British Birds* 69: 377-383.
- _____. 1977. Further definition of Great Snipe characters. *ibidem* 70: 283-289.

P.B. Taylor, Box 70415, Ndola, Zambia

(Received 18 February 1980)